



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

# When the spotlight is always on the neighborhood: LGBTQ people from a Muslim background deconstructing imagined borders in Brussels, Belgium

### Citation for published version:

Boussalem, A 2021, 'When the spotlight is always on the neighborhood: LGBTQ people from a Muslim background deconstructing imagined borders in Brussels, Belgium', *Sexualities*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720986932>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/1363460720986932](https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720986932)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Published In:

*Sexualities*

### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# **When the spotlight is always on the neighborhood: LGBTQ people from a Muslim background deconstructing imagined borders in Brussels, Belgium**

## **Abstract**

This article examines the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in their navigations of different areas of Brussels, and their narratives on such experiences. It builds on literature on the territorialization of homo/bi/transphobia to neighborhoods framed as “Muslim” in continental Western Europe, and the imagination of rigid borders separating these areas from other parts of the city. The article presents analysis of semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background on their experiences of these demarcations. The analysis of data calls for a deconstruction of rigid discourses of difference and division at work in the city. This allows for an understanding of the complex ways in which LGBTQ people from a Muslim background relate to different areas of the city, and how their multiple crossings into/from racialized-as-Muslim neighbourhoods escape the rigidity of essentialized imaginations of the city along civilizational lines.

## **Keywords**

LGBTQ, Muslims, intersectionality, Islamophobia, Brussels

## 1 Introduction

In summer 2012, the documentary *Femme de la Rue*, by Sofie Peeters, was released in Belgium. In the movie, a camera follows the director as she walks in the neighborhood of Annessens-Lemonnier, showing the impact of street harassment on the movements of a woman in Brussels. The documentary was shown on national TV, giving momentum to a public debate on street harassment, which resulted in the approval of a law against sexism in public spaces two years later (Charruau, 2015). Despite its positive outcome in illuminating the impact of sexism on women's movements in the city, many observers critiqued the racializing tones of the movie (Gendron, 2012; Khoury, 2012). The scene is set in a neighborhood with a high concentration of people with North African origins (Torrekens, 2007), and the harassment shown is perpetrated by men who are readable by the audience, and framed by the director, as Arab/Muslim.

Muslim populations in Brussels are heavily concentrated in certain areas (Torrekens, 2007). Such concentration has been instrumentalized in the production of discourses framing these neighborhoods as "Muslim", and, especially after the terrorist attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016), as inhabited by dangerous populations (Traynor, 2015). Depicting these neighborhoods as inherently sexist, narratives such as that of *Femme de la Rue* add another layer to the frames attached to these areas, marking them as "no women's land" (Di Méo, 2011). These representations contribute to the relegation of sexism to specific, racialized neighborhoods (Hancock, 2017), as rigid borders are discursively constructed between differently racialized areas (Donnen, 2019). Discourses on different cultural attitudes towards gender are conflated with discourses on attitudes towards sexualities (Bracke, 2012), as the movements of women and LGBTQ people are thought to be the most impacted by these borders.

In this article, I present my analysis of data on the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in relation to these imagined borders, and their movements across them. I focus on participants' experiences of racialized-as-Muslim neighborhoods, and on their crossings into/from these. Data is from 30 semi-structured interviews that were part of a wider ethnographic research aimed at exploring the intersections of homo/bi/transphobia and racism/Islamophobia in Brussels. All interviews were conducted by me, an Italian-Moroccan cis gay man from a Muslim background. All participants identified as LGBTQ and from a Muslim background. The project aimed at highlighting how processes of sexualization and racialization of Muslim groups and individuals (Meer and Modood, 2012) intervened in shaping participants' lives. Because of this, the religious identification of participants – as well as their beliefs and spiritual practices – were less central in the collection and analysis of data. Participants were recruited in different spaces where I conducted participant observation (parties, social gatherings, cultural festivals, social media platforms) and through snowballing.

The first section of this article grounds the analysis in literature on the territorialization of social issues to racialized neighborhoods, and the discursive construction of borders between differently racialized areas. The following sections present participants' experiences of such imagined divisions. The focus is on the elements that discourses of cultural tension and division erase from racialized-as-Muslim neighborhoods. Participants' experiences and narratives do not conform to a rigidly dichotomic view of the city. While some of their movements are influenced by a homo/bi/transphobia that is perceived to be more present in certain (racialized) neighborhoods, other elements – a sense of belonging and familiarity to “Muslim” areas, a sense of agency towards social change that participants enact in these areas, and the presence of people who are supportive of their sexualities – are equally important in informing their movements in Brussels. I argue that a disruption of rigidly

constructed borders is necessary to understand how LGBTQ people from a Muslim background navigate spaces in Brussels.

## **2 Imagining difference, constructing borders: The territorialization of homo/bi/transphobia to racialized neighborhoods**

Ideas of irreducible difference between the West and the Arab/Muslim East have shaped Western imaginations of the world, resulting in the positing of certain “Eastern” territories and populations as ontologically Other (Said, 1978 [2003]). Relationships between the West and the Arab/Muslim East are often constructed as marked by civilizational difference, tension and incompatibility (Huntington, 1997). In “clash of civilization” frames, differences in attitudes towards sexual difference and gender equality are central in demarcating the two fields (Lewis, 2010). Muslim civilization is assumed to be inherently and monolithically sexist and homo/bi/transphobic, while the West is posited as the natural, albeit exceptional, repository of values of acceptance of and support for women’s and LGBTQ rights (Bracke, 2011; Rahman, 2014). This civilizational script rests on specific roles assigned to specific subjects. Women and LGBTQ people, whether white/Western or racialized as Arab/Muslim, are constructed as vulnerable, to be protected and/or rescued from Arab/Muslim sexism and homo/bi/transphobia (Haritaworn, 2010; Bracke, 2012; Jungar and Peltonen, 2015). By contrast, the Arab/Muslim man is imagined as *the* perpetrator of homo/bi/transphobic and sexist violence (Razack, 2004; Guénif-Souilamas and Macé, 2004). The rigidity of these roles results in the use of categories of gender and sexualities in the construction of an irreparable fracture between Muslim communities and LGBTQ populations, as the ontological binarization “Muslim or gay” (Puar, 2007) becomes a central tenet of this discourse.

On the global scale, the workings of a discourse that posits the West as LGBTQ-friendly and the Arab/Muslim East as homo/bi/transphobic are visible in the foreign policies of Western

nations (Puar, 2007), as well as in the political discourses of international LGBTQ rights organizations (Rao, 2014). This is not the only scale where this discourse unfolds, as it informs spatial imaginations and policies *in* Western nations and cities, especially those that are inhabited by both white/Western and racialized-as-Muslim populations (Hancock, 2008). Scholars have noted how racialized-as-Muslim neighborhoods in Western European cities are constructed as presenting the same civilizational difference attached to territories framed as Muslim on the global scale. Exacerbated by events such as revolts of racialized youth in the French *banlieues* in the years 2000s (Dikeç, 2006), and the planning of terrorist attacks by cells operating in these areas, these imaginations result in the portrayal and perception of “Muslim” neighborhoods as the “problem zone of Europe” (Stehle, 2006: : 59). The Muslim neighborhood is constructed as extra-European, representing the border of the continent and the beginning of the “elsewhere” inhabited by Muslim populations. At the same time, its centrality is constantly reiterated to highlight the level of danger and threat that it represents for the integrity of Western values (Dikeç, 2006).

At once *here*, in its threatening potential, and *there*, in its cultural distance, the racialized-as-Muslim neighborhood becomes the site where social issues linked to assumptions of irreducible difference in Muslim communities are relegated to (Stehle, 2006; El-Tayeb, 2011). Given the centrality of attitudes towards gender equality and sexual diversity in civilizational discourses, homo/bi/transphobia and sexism are prominent among these social issues. Hancock (2017) notes how the spatialization of sexism to specific areas, in the case of the *banlieues* of Paris, serves two purposes. On the one hand, it allows the blaming of specific groups – e.g. Muslims, migrants, young people from the “neighborhoods” – as responsible for certain practices, such as sexual harassment. On the other, it erases the existence of these practices from the rest of the city, making it a problem of “minorities”. The

discourse thus smoothly moves from being centered around sexism, to become about the failed “integration” of racialized groups (Stehle, 2006).

The assignation of homo/bi/transphobia to specific areas informs how boundaries between safe and unsafe spaces for LGBTQ people are constructed, as well as how their life trajectories are imagined to unfold in a direction that leads them “out” of unsafety (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Wimark and Östh, 2014). In the city, this assignation results in the discursive construction of rigid borders between differently racialized areas (Amilhat-Szary, 2012; Staszak et al., 2017; Donnen, 2019). Subsequently, the lives of the LGBTQ people are imagined along a rigid unidirectional trajectory – “out” of the neighborhood, away from the homo/bi/transphobia. In Brussels, Donnen (2019) focuses on the constructed “border” of Place Fontainas, separating the sexualized-as-gay neighborhood from the area of Anneessens-Lemonnier, marked by a high concentration of Muslim populations. He looks at how the rigidity of such border hides the multiple passages and encounters that happen at this site. As he analyzes this border as ephemeral and permeable, and the spaces it demarcates as far from homogeneous, he mobilizes the concept of “borderland” as articulated by Anzaldúa (1987).

Anzaldúa (1987) defined the borderland as a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary [...] in a constant state of transition”, inhabited by “those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (25). In her articulation, the naturalness and fixity of the border are disrupted, as it emerges in its contingent construction as a device “set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (ibid.). Applying the concept of borderland to the constructed boundaries that demarcate areas inhabited by majority white populations and racialized-as-Muslim communities allows for the observation of what is hidden beyond this fictional rigidity. Processes of racialization and sexualization of different populations and the areas

they inhabit emerge as entangled with one another, at the same time intersecting with categories of gender and class. Moreover, the presence of people and activities in the “borderland” itself escapes a rigid division of the city into us/them areas (Donnen, 2019).

This disruption results in the recognition of the complexities that mark the site where the border is assumed to be, as well as both fields it demarcates. In the case of Place Fontainas, Donnen (2019) notes how the borderland is itself inhabited and crossed by different people, and the recognition of such presences and movements can be telling of wider urban dynamics. Specifically, he points to the presence of homeless people regularly sleeping in the square, and it being a central spot for the dealing of illegal drugs. All these elements are downplayed, if not outright erased, by the insistence on framing the square as a site of cultural tension. In addition to this, the imagination of racialized neighborhoods as inherently different in cultural terms works to hide some of their relevant features. Dikeç (2006) notes how discourses of cultural tension hide the economic grievances that often mark life in racialized neighborhoods. As already mentioned, Hancock (2017) highlights how the assignation of social issues to racialized neighborhoods hides their presence in other spaces. In Brussels, the insistence on depictions of Anneessens as a neighborhood marked by unsafety for women and LGBTQ people, for example, contributes to hide the exclusions at work in the adjacent “gay street”. In here, most venues target their events at gay and bisexual men, resulting in some degree of invisibilisation of LBT women (Donnen, 2019). Huysentruyt et al. (2015) show how exclusions based on gender expression, race/ethnicity and class are at work in the “gay street” and how their intersections shape different experiences of (dis)comfort and (un)safety for the LGBTQ people who access it. These analyses call for a more nuanced look at the relationship between racialized neighborhoods and the rest of the city, by considering their division as the result of specific representations resulting from systems of power and oppression at work in the city (Dikeç, 2006).



Such nuancing can greatly benefit from an intersectional approach that focuses on the entanglements of multiple lines of power and identification in shaping experiences of social relations (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality allows us to observe and analyze how different senses of belonging inform the specific experiences of people who identify along multiple lines (Yuval-Davis, 2007), how interlocking lines of power and oppression materialize in specific spaces and social contexts (Hopkins, 2018), and how their interlocking produces different senses of (un)safety and (dis)comfort in the people who inhabit and/or move through them (Rodó-de-Zárate, 2015). Rahman (2010) notes how an intersectional focus on the identities of LGBTQ Muslims already disrupts the binary East/West imagination that underpins discourses of civilizational difference: the juxtaposition of “LGBTQ” and “Muslim” linguistically collapses assumptions of irreducible difference between an LGBTQ-friendly West and a homo/bi/transphobic East. This is why the centering of LGBTQ Muslim experiences in Brussels, obscured under the veil of either/or discourses, is essential to understand how discursive borders between different areas are constructed, and how they can be disrupted.

### **3 Worlds apart in the space of a couple of km: Binarized discourses of sexual difference in Brussels**

Some of the narratives offered by participants reflect binarized discourses that describe borders between differently racialized areas as having a big impact on the movements of LGBTQ people. Many participants describe such areas as “different worlds”, stressing how different norms are upheld on different sides of the imagined border:

“When you go to Molenbeek, you’re not in Brussels any more. No matter what we say, it’s not really Brussels. [...] We cross the canal, and it’s... it’s another world” (Jacob, 21, cis gay man, Moroccan descent).

Talking about his feelings towards different neighborhoods, Youness (27, cis gay/bisexual man, Moroccan descent), took a paper handkerchief from the table and started drawing a circle and a square:

“When I’m at my parents’ [in Molenbeek] it’s... you see, it’s very squared [points to the square he has just drawn]. And when I’m here, at my place, in De Brouckère [points to the circle]. [...] And the worst thing is that here it’s the center, and this is Molenbeek, and there’s not even two kilometers [...]” (Youness).

It was surprising to realize the level of precision by which these borders are imprinted in participants’ narratives. In addition to the canal separating the center from Molenbeek, Place Fontainas was mentioned in many interviews. The crossing of Place Fontainas is viewed as an entrance in a different normative setting, where one’s performance needs to change to ensure personal safety:

“The moment you go outside, to Anneessens, [...] you wouldn’t be openly gay as you are within the gay area. You wouldn’t be holding hands, you wouldn’t be kissing in the streets” (Sherif, 30, cis gay man, Egyptian).

Many participants mentioned the need to change their gender and sexuality performance to avoid homo/bi/transphobic attacks and sexist remarks in racialized neighborhoods, perceived to be inhospitable to LGBTQ people and women. These narratives were often accompanied by negative feelings towards these neighborhoods. Importantly, the risk of homo/bi/transphobic attacks intersects with other types of violence – sexist, racist/Islamophobic, classist – in shaping participants’ perceptions of different areas. Talking about her movements, Sofia mentions sexist harassment as one of the major elements impacting them:

“I don’t hang out in like Molenbeek, or those areas where maybe like... Turkish or Moroccan neighborhoods. [...] For example, if I go to Marché du Midi, on Sunday, I would not wear any clothes that I would be wearing maybe now [...]. Well, I would tend to cover myself” (Sofia, 28, cis biromantic woman, Moroccan).

Sofia verbalizes a direct link between how she feels about certain areas of Brussels, and the country where she grew up. The connection between the global “there”, framed as the Muslim North African/Middle Eastern region marked by a lack of gender equality and sexual freedom, is at the other end of a continuum that begins in the “Turkish or Moroccan neighborhoods”. She explicitly articulated the link between these two scales of “civilizational clash”:

“[...] somehow it’s sometimes very similar to Morocco. There are way too many Moroccans in the streets. I can go around and speak my language. So, sometimes I feel judged”.

A discourse of difference and tension on lines of sexual and gender acceptance is reflected in many narratives produced by participants on different areas of Brussels. It is important to note that even the narratives presented in this section do not perfectly mirror discourses that divide the city in white friendly spaces and Muslim unfriendly ones. A deeper analysis allows for the emergence of elements that complicate this simplistic binarization. Youness, after presenting Molenbeek and the rest of city as completely different in terms of the freedom of expression he enjoys, goes on to describe his sense of attachment to the neighborhood where he grew up. He adds that he feels safe whenever he goes back to Molenbeek, and that nothing bad ever happens to him. Sofia, on the other hand, who did not grow up in Brussels, admits that her experience of racialized-as-Muslim areas in the city is limited. With regards to

Molenbeek, she had been there only once, and she could not remember anything that made her feel unsafe.

Ryzlan (29, genderfluid and lesbian, Moroccan descent) offers a key to interpret this detachment between the extent to which personal narratives can confirm and mirror binarized discourses of the city, and the complex personal experiences participants have of different neighborhoods. When talking about her<sup>1</sup> moving to the municipality of Anderlecht, she said:

“At the beginning, when I was in the neighborhood, maybe [I had] some prejudices. Through these prejudices, I modified my natural behavior, by not flaunting. But, with time, [...] I realized that it was a prejudice, and that it actually... there’s no reason. And so then, I took back my... my natural attitude, my natural behavior in relating to women. And nothing has ever happened. [...] However, an important thing is that I will naturally feel more comfortable with my homosexuality, although my experiences of homophobia happened in the center, I will naturally feel more comfortable with my homosexuality in neighborhoods that are in the center, or Ixelles, or that have the reputation of being more open. But not necessarily. So, it’s really... it’s really a play... almost a psychological play. Of... of norms, really. Perception, or reputation”.

Ryzlan’s words show the difficulty in disentangling personal experiences and collective imaginations in how one perceives and experiences different neighborhoods. Discourses about Anderlecht impacted Ryzlan’s feelings when she moved there. As she got to know the area, she realized that it was safe for her. Nonetheless, even after living there for years, and as she began to perform her sexuality as freely as she would in the center – by “taking back her natural attitude” – she still intuitively feels more comfortable, and safer, in areas of the city

---

<sup>1</sup> Pronouns used to refer to participants are the ones they expressed as being more reflective of their gender identity during interviews

depicted as more accepting of sexual diversity. This is despite the fact that all the homophobic episodes she experienced and/or witnessed happened in these areas and not in neighborhoods framed as unsafe.

I am not suggesting here, as Ryzlan certainly was not, that homo/bi/transphobia does not take place in racialized neighborhoods, nor am I diminishing the impact it has on the lives of participants who reported a sense of insecurity when being there. What I am highlighting is the impact of discourses on safe/unsafe areas, and the rigid divisions between them, on the ways participants narrate their movements. In Ryzlan's narrative, the feelings of unsafety and discomfort are not determined by her direct experience of homo/bi/transphobia. Rather, they are the result of "a psychological play of norms", in which "perceptions" of safety and the "reputation" of a neighborhood are intertwined in producing her sense of (dis)comfort. Once the limits of these discourses are recognized, in an attempt to overcome their potency in shaping perceptions, intuitive feelings, and narratives about such feelings, it is possible to explore other elements that characterize different urban areas.

#### **4 Blurring borders and moving the spotlight: The emergence of complexities from the voices of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background**

Not all participants share a view of neighborhoods framed as Muslim as particularly unsafe or exceptionally limiting of their freedom of expression. When asked about his opinion of the images attached to different neighborhoods, Karim (46, cis gay man, Algerian) replied:

"I refuse, you know, this kind of statements. Yeah. This part of the city is not renowned, or very quiet... and blah blah blah".

Another participant, Ghalia (35, genderqueer and pansexual, Belgian/Algerian descent), mirrors in her words the insistence by Donnen (2019) and Dikeç (2006) on the processes of

discursive construction that produce borders between differently racialized areas of the city. She rejected the pretense of reflection of ontological reality performed by such discourses through the employment of the metaphor of a spotlight. Talking about episodes of sexual harassment and homo/bi/transphobia perpetrated by white men in the city, she said:

“Curious how we don’t talk much about that. So, really, the spotlight is always pointed on the neighborhoods. Now, this isn’t a reason to say that everything goes well in the neighborhoods, it’s far from being so. [...] But there are some forms of coming together that anyway allow us to... to breathe”.

Later in the interview, Ghalia reported being “very attached to” these “forms of coming together”, as she described them as characterized by a “strong community” and “solidarity”.

While such spotlight rightly points to some issues that these areas present, it works to keep other elements in the dark. The spotlight allows for the emergence of the negative aspects of these neighborhoods, downplaying the positive ones. Recognizing the workings of this discursive spotlight, and attempting to enlarge its scope, allows for the observation of elements that could disrupt the rigidity of binarized ways of imagining the city. This operation is similar to the one that Butler (2009) articulates as “framing the frame”, “to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside, possible, recognizable” (9). The data presented in this section offers a series of elements that nuance the image of racialized-as-Muslim neighborhoods in Brussels, allowing for a rethinking of their relationship with the rest of the city.

#### **4.1 *“I was in the neighborhood, in my pink trousers”: LGBTQ agency in the neighborhoods***

Participants often talked about strategies they enact to contrast multiple intersecting lines of oppression: sexism, homo/bi/transphobia, racism/Islamophobia, both in racialized neighborhoods and elsewhere. This section focuses on actions and performances that disrupt heteronormativity in racialized neighbourhoods and among Arab/Muslim people. Discursive divisions of the city in safe/unsafe areas on lines of cultural attitudes towards sexualities imply the need for LGBTQ people to change their sexual and gender performance when entering “Muslim” neighborhoods – hiding one’s sexuality, or at least “toning it down”. Some participants offered narratives that were in contrast with this:

“To apply make-up. For example, wearing eye-liner, for me it’s an act... [...] antisexism, antihomophobia, etcetera. [...] For me it’s a way to fight against the... break the codes, really, the ones that they absolutely wanted to ingrain in me. So, yeah. It happened once that I... I wore pink trousers. To piss people off. There, it’s my way. I was in the neighborhood, in my pink trousers. What are you going to do? What happens now? [Laughs]” (Salim, 28, cis gay man, Moroccan descent).

Salah (28, cis gay man, Moroccan descent) talked about his strategy to deal with “super-straight Arab men” by being “really unapologetic” about who he is. As a result of this unapologetic stance, which includes making sexual jokes, “flipping hair”, and “getting out some Beyoncé stuff”, his relationship with heterosexual racialized men in the city has changed. Talking about him and his group of friends, he says:

“We created these identities where we are so funny and we are so witty with who we are, that we are accepted by these Arab guys. Also girls. Because they can’t help it but like us”.

Hamid's (25, cis gay man, Tunisian descent) reactions to heteronormativity are rooted in a desire to educate people around him, as he believes that the oppression he encounters is a direct result of a lack of knowledge:

“[...] whenever I got stopped in the street for like... you know, when I've been called out for that kind of shit [wearing tattoos and piercings], by like an... like, Arab or Muslim person, I like to talk about it? [...] I've noticed that, whenever some guy notices I have more knowledge about Islam, or like the Arab world, then they just stop completely. [...] Because you can talk to me about women, about even homosexuality, and that kind of shit, I will find historical references”.

For Hamid, “talking about it” when being “called out” in the street has two functions. On the one hand, it acts as a protection: as soon as the person understands the extent of Hamid's knowledge, they stop harassing him. On the other, it serves the wider function of educating people, filling gaps in their knowledge that result in the oppression directed at him. It is important to note how Hamid does not limit this kind of “educating” reaction to the heteronormativity or homo/bi/transphobia in Muslim/Arab communities. During his interview, he mentioned episodes in which he reacted similarly to the racism and Islamophobia of white LGBTQ people.

A discourse that insists on the oppression lived by LGBTQ subjects in Muslim/Arab contexts, and on their need to be protected/rescued from such oppression, does not reflect the complexity of Salim's, Salah's and Hamid's experiences. While the homo/bi/transphobia across racialized neighborhoods, as elsewhere in the city, needs to be addressed, the roles played by participants are multifaceted. Rigid mainstream discourses erase the agency exercised by participants towards a disruption of social norms, as well as the processes of individual empowerment that some of them go through in response to that same homo/bi/transphobia that is always kept at center stage in discourses on difference in the city.



#### 4.2 *“I’m at home”: Belonging and attachment to the neighborhood*

Another element that emerges from participants’ narratives is the feeling of attachment that some of them feel towards “Muslim” neighborhoods, often framed as a sense of “feeling at home”.

“The thing is that I grew up in Molenbeek, yeah? So, this means that when I go to Molenbeek, I feel like I’m at home, I know the streets by heart, I know all the... the shopping streets, the tiny streets. [...] Of course, I also know people. [...] I feel very good in Molenbeek. I’ve never had any problems. Well, there’s always... this sexism, this male chauvinism, that exists over there, but generally, when they know you, that you pass there often, ah... there’s no problem” (Sam, 29, cis lesbian woman, Moroccan descent).

Sam’s words did not downplay the role of sexism and homo/bi/transphobia in the lives of people in Molenbeek. During her interview, she detailed the impact that these elements had on her choice to leave the neighborhood. Nonetheless, she still feels a sense of attachment to it. The crossing of the border that separates Molenbeek from the rest of the city is described as a “coming back home”, rather than entering an unsafe space where her freedom of expression is irremediably limited. For Sam, as for other participants, the line dividing the neighborhood where she grew up and the ones where she has lived since she moved out of it cannot be described as a rigid border. Her multiple passages between the two areas – away from the “sexism” and the “chauvinism”, but also back home to a familiar space – show the need to blur the rigidity of that demarcation, as the participants’ experiences often unfold in the liminal space between them. Observing this in-between area as a borderland, as that “place of contradictions” where the “border” person is continuously trying to keep “intact

one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity" (Anzaldúa, 1987: : 19), is necessary to grasp the complexities of participants' experiences of differently racialized areas.

Participants who did not grow up in Brussels also mention this sense of attachment. Sliman (32, cis gay man, Algerian descent) moved to the city from Liège. His place is very near Place Fontainas, the borderland that is the focus of Donnen's (2019) work. Sliman is very aware that the square is imagined as marking the passage from an LGBTQ-friendly area of the city, to one that is framed as homo/bi/transphobic because of its high concentration of Muslim populations. His feelings of (dis)comfort do not match mainstream narratives of crossings of the imagined border:

"I live in the center. In a place where I can choose to go to the gay street. [...] And the other way is the other boulevard, which is the Moroccan boulevard. And I go there very often. I feel... Ok, I feel better in this Moroccan area than in this Zara area. In this mainstream Zara area. [...] I've noticed that if I were to go out [in the Moroccan boulevard], and it's very... I don't know, I wouldn't wear something so gay, but I don't have so many... obviously gay clothes".

Sliman does not deny that some limits to his expression are at work in the "Moroccan boulevard". Nonetheless, he stresses his being more at ease when moving through this area, compared to other parts of the city he does not feel the same sense of attachment to. His experience of comfort/discomfort directly confutes the unidirectionality of movement for LGBTQ people posited by mainstream discourses. He prefers to cross the border in the direction of Anneessens-Lemonnier, rather than towards the gay street. By mentioning a popular clothes shopping venue and brand, he marked the gay street in terms of class and patterns of consumption, showing how different lines of identification and difference – in this case sexuality, ethnicity *and* class – intersect in shaping participants' experiences of urban

spaces (Rodó-de-Zárate, 2015). Sliman's and Sam's experiences disrupt discourses that rely on the assumed vulnerability of LGBTQ people in racialized-as-Muslim neighborhoods, and thus their desire to escape from them, or avoid entering them. While both recognize the presence of sexism and homo/bi/transphobia in these neighborhoods, these elements do not prevent them from wanting to access them.

#### **4.3 *Problematizing the figure of the Arab/Muslim man***

Discourses of unsafety for LGBTQ people in racialized-as-Muslim neighborhoods rely on the image of the Arab/Muslim man as a threat (Razack, 2004; Guénif-Souilamas and Macé, 2004). While many participants reported violent and dangerous encounters with Arab/Muslim men in the city, others articulated narratives where Arab/Muslim men played an important role in producing a sense of safety, acceptance, and freedom. There is a need to illuminate the existence of these encounters, not because they are more relevant than the homo/bi/transphobic ones that participants live, but because they are erased from discourses of difference in the city. Again, these experiences highlight the limits of imagining the city as rigidly divided into clearly demarcated areas on cultural/civilizational lines. Instead, it is necessary to observe how these areas are not as internally homogeneous as they are imagined. Illuminating the existence of encounters with Arab/Muslim men who are supportive of LGBTQ freedoms in the neighborhoods nuances imaginations of cultural tension in Brussels and contributes to a disruption of the rigidity of the borders constructed between differently racialized neighborhoods.

When talking about moving to the municipality of Forêt with his partner, Karim reported:

“Our place is just, I mean, immediately close to a Moroccan café. And at the very beginning they just noticed we are two men, and... And the owner of this café-bar was really really friendly. I was also a little bit proactive. And I just introduced myself

to him, and we spoke a bit in Arabic, and I say ‘Yeah, I live with my boyfriend. And I hope that it will not be a problem for you’. And he said ‘No, no. On the contrary, please feel free and if you notice something wrong just give me a call...’. And they were always very friendly and correct”.

What can be framed as a marker of risk for LGBTQ people in common narratives on Brussels neighborhoods, the presence of Arab men in public spaces, becomes in his experience a marker of safety and support, as the café owner actively offered his solidarity should homophobic oppression be directed at him and his partner. Jacob also told of an ally he found in his Islamic religion teacher in secondary school, in Molenbeek:

“So, we often talked about homosexuality [in class], and there were lots of... negative feedback on this. I was the only... There were two of us who defended gay rights, really. And he [the teacher] was on our side. Because he had a cousin who was gay”.

Jacob’s experience further deconstructs the assumed links between racialized Islam and homo/bi/transphobia in the neighborhood. This deconstruction is reinforced by the fact that the supportive person Jacob is talking about was his teacher of Islamic religion in school, a person whose role was that of educating him in those values that civilizational discourses posit as incompatible with Western ones in their inherent homo/bi/transphobia.

## **5 “A place that is rather working-class”: What is left out of the cultural frame**

Frames that insist on “cultural difference” often work to silence reflections and debates that center around other categories of analysis (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Dikeç (2006) notes how, in Paris, this cultural or “ethnic” framing of difference results in the erasure of the economic deprivation that marks its racialized *banlieues*. Processes of racialization and class assignation to identity groups and the spaces they inhabit often overlap in Western European

cities, in intersection with processes of migratisation, sexualisation and gendering (Tudor, 2018). Insistence on a single category of differentiation – i.e. racialized cultural difference – results in its conflation with other relevant ones, erasing their specific workings and the power dynamics that produce them (Donnen, 2019).

Class emerged in participants' narratives as an important category that shaped their perceptions and navigations of different neighborhoods. When asked about their experiences of racialized areas, many participants were quick in reframing them as areas primarily marked by working-classness. As soon as the topic was mentioned, Ghalia started verbalizing her thoughts on the best words to name these neighborhoods. Her conclusion was that “popular neighborhoods” would entail the least amount of problematic essentialization. Similarly, Jalal (35, trans heterosexual man, Algerian descent) quickly moved the conversation towards the category of class as soon as the topic of difference between neighborhoods emerged:

“I always bring it back to poor... areas. Which is different. Because if it were white people it would be the same”.

Class is not only used by participants to explain some of the issues that arise in the neighborhoods, but also as a feature that facilitates their sense of belonging to them. This could already be seen in the extract quoted above from Sliman's interview. When describing his sense of comfort in accessing the “Moroccan boulevard”, he contrasted this with the “Zara boulevard”, highlighting the relevance of class in shaping his levels of comfort when moving through different urban spaces. Other participants made explicit reference to their class background when describing their attachment to their neighborhoods. Talking about Anderlecht, Ryzlan said:

“So, the place where I live, it’s rather... a place that is rather working-class. [...] I have a working-class background. [...] Anyway, I feel very very good where I am, because, at a social level, something developed and I created something with the people in the neighborhoods who are... they are really in this... this working-class environment”.

I am not suggesting here that class is *the* relevant category to interpret difference in Brussels. Rather, I am calling for an analysis of the city that is attentive to how multiple lines of power, and their assignations of race, class, culture, migratory status, gender, and sexuality to specific groups and the spaces they inhabit (Tudor, 2018), work together in shaping perceptions of spaces. My goal is to enlarge that spotlight that is always pointed on the neighborhoods, and specifically on the cultural difference that the neighborhoods represent, so that what comes to light can be more representative of how the city is experienced by the people who live in it.

## **6 Conclusion**

Discourses on civilizational difference between the West and the Arab/Muslim East on the global scale are mirrored and reproduced in the imagination of rigid borders separating differently racialized areas of Brussels. In this imagination, the racialized-as-Muslim neighborhood is framed as the internal elsewhere (Dikeç, 2006), the “problem zone of Europe” (Stehle, 2006: : 59) where social issues are relegated to, so that the rest of the city can emerge in its civilizational superiority (Hancock, 2017). The maintenance of this discourse works through the repetition of a rigid script: vulnerable women and LGBTQ people escape from the Muslim neighborhood, made unfriendly and inhospitable by the homo/bi/transphobia and sexism of Arab/Muslim men.

This article shows that this imagination fails to grasp the complexity of experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in the city. Their navigations of Brussels reveal multiple, and sometimes contrasting, feelings towards neighborhoods and the communities that inhabit them. These feelings can include a sense of unsafety, and of limited freedom, in racialized-as-Muslim neighborhoods. They also include a sense of belonging to these neighborhoods, as well as a desire and drive to produce social change through the non-normative performances they enact in them. Participants' narratives present encounters with homo/bi/transphobic violence in the racialized neighborhoods, but also encounters with supportive actors, who helped them in their path of self-acceptance.

The rigid borders that are discursively constructed between differently racialized neighborhoods do not reflect how participants move through and across them. Their trajectory is not one that brings them, once and for all, out of the neighborhood, in their assumed escape from homo/bi/transphobia. Instead, their passages are multiple and continuous. They consist of partial escapes and partial comebacks, as their lives in the racialized neighborhoods are marked by both a sense of being at home and a sense of being the odd one out. Rather than a rigid border, the space between these areas is more usefully conceptualized as a "borderland" (Anzaldúa, 1987), a space of fluidity, contradictions, and ambiguities where the multiple passages of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background can take place.

My goal in this article was to enlarge that spotlight that is always pointed on racialized-as-Muslim neighborhoods, and on their more problematic sides. In addition to deconstructing the rigidity and fixity of the lines that are imagined as borders in the city, it is necessary to disrupt the solidity of the category through which such lines are drawn in the first place, that of cultural tension between white and racialized-as-Muslim communities. As pointed out by

Dikeç (2006), Tudor (2018), and Donnen (2019), cultural difference is but one of the categories that intervene in shaping difference and tension between different communities in Western Europe, and an insistence on it as the only relevant one erases the workings of other power dynamics. The data analyzed here showed how class assignation and racialization are entangled in shaping participants' perceptions and navigations of the city, in intersection with other processes, such as sexualization, gendering, etc. This paper contributes to an intersectional analysis of urban spaces and the groups and communities that inhabit them. In doing so, it shows how the illumination of the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background serves to interrogate and disrupt imagined east/west civilizational discourses in their construction and reproduction at the urban scale. The implications of this disruption have the potential to go well beyond a better understanding of the lives and experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. A rigorous interrogation of the centrality of "cultural difference", and the binarized imagination of the city that results from it, is necessary to understand the complex ways in which different neighborhood are crossed by multiple intersecting lines of power and oppression, and how these shape senses of belonging, processes of identification and urban navigations of the people who inhabit them. A recognition of the multiple entangled lines that produce individual and collective experiences of urban spaces – beyond the dichotomy white/Muslim on lines of respect and support for women's and LGBTQ lives and rights – allows to better understand the social issues that are present in the city, how they are experienced by different individuals and groups, and to envision political and social actions better suited to address them.



- Abu-Lughod L (2002) Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its Others. *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 783-790.
- Amilhat-Szary A-L (2012) Frontières et conflits: une approche territoriale. *Bulletin de l'Association des géographes français* 1: 18-33.
- Anzaldúa G (1987) *Borderlands, la frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Bracke S (2011) Subjects of debate: Secular and sexual exceptionalism, and Muslim women in the Netherlands. *Feminist review* 98: 28-46.
- Bracke S (2012) From 'saving women' to 'saving gays': Rescue narratives and their dis/continuities. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19(2): 237-252.
- Butler J (2009) *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* London: Verso.
- Charruau J (2015) Une loi contre le sexisme? Étude de l'initiative belge. *La Revue des Droits de l'Homme: Revue de Centre de recherches et d'études sur les droits fondamentaux*, 7. (accessed 21/06/2019).
- Collins PH and Bilge S (2016) *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Di Méo G (2011) *Les murs invisibles: Femmes, genre, et géographie sociale*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Dikeç M (2006) Badlands of the Republic? Revolts, the French state, and the question of *banlieues*. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24: 159-163.
- Donnen A (2019) La place Fontainas comme espace frontière. La production de la ville au regard de la sexualité, du genre, de l'ethnicité et de la classe sociale *Brussels Studies*. DOI: 10.4000/brussels.3738. (accessed 08/10/2019).
- El-Tayeb F (2011) *European Others: Queering ethnicity in postcolonial Europe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gendron G (2012) *Le 'harcèlement de rue', filmé par une jeune Bruxelloise, fait débat*. Available at: <http://www.rfi.fr/europe/20120801-harcelement-feminisme-belgique-racisme> (accessed 27/06/2019).
- Gorman-Murray A (2007) Rethinking queer migration through the body *Social & Cultural Geography* 8(1): 105-121.
- Guénif-Souilamas N and Macé E (2004) *Les féministes et le garçon arabe*. Paris: AUBE.
- Hancock C (2008) Décoloniser les représentations: esquisse d'une géographie culturelle de nos « Autres ». *Annales de Géographie* (660-661): 116-128.
- Hancock C (2017) Feminism from the margin: challenging the Paris/Banlieue divide. *Antipode* 49(3): 636-656.
- Haritaworn J (2010) Queer injuries: the racial politics of 'homophobic hate crime' in Germany. *Social Justice* 37(1 (119): 69-89.
- Hopkins P (2018) Feminist geographies and intersectionality. *Gender, Place & Culture* 25(4): 585-590.
- Huntington SP (1997) *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. New York: Touchstone.
- Huysentruyt H, Meier P and Dewaele A (2015) Inclusions and exclusions in the Brussels Gay Neighbourhood: an intersectional analysis *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 2(1-2): 157-171.
- Jungar K and Peltonen S (2015) 'Saving Muslim queer women from Muslim heteropatriarchy'. Savior narratives in LGBTI youth work. *NORMA International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 10(2): 136-149.
- Khoury S (2012) *Harcèlement de rue: comment aborder le problème sans tomber dans le racisme?* Available at: <http://www.slate.fr/tribune/60157/harcelement-rue-racisme-sexisme> (accessed 27/06/2019).
- Lewis B (2010) *Faith and power: religion and politics in the Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meer N and Modood T (2012) For 'Jewish' read 'Muslim'? Islamophobia as a form of racialisation of ethno-religious groups in Britain today. *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 1(1): 34-53.
- Peeters S (2012) *Femme de la rue*.
- Puar J (2007) *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Rahman M (2010) Queer as intersectionality: theorizing gay Muslim identities. *Sociology* 44(5): 944-961.
- Rahman M (2014) *Homosexualities, muslim cultures and modernities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rao R (2014) The locations of homophobia. *London Review of International Law* 2(2): 169-199.

- Razack SH (2004) Imperilled Muslim women, dangerous Muslim men and civilised Europeans: legal and social responses to forced marriages. *Feminist Legal Studies* 12: 129-174.
- Rodó-de-Zárate M (2015) Young lesbians negotiating public space: an intersectional approach through places. *Children's Geographies* 13(4): 413-434.
- Said EW (1978 [2003]) *Orientalism*. London: London : Penguin.
- Staszak J-F, Debarbieux B and Pieroni R (2017) Frontières, identités, altérité. In: Staszak J-F (ed) *Frontières en tous genres: Closennement spatial et constructions identitaires*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, pp.15-36.
- Stehle M (2006) Narrating the ghetto, narrating Europe: from Berlin, Kreuzberg ro the banlieues of Paris. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 3(3): 48-70.
- Torrekens C (2007) Concentration of Muslim populations and structure of Muslim associations in Brussels. *Brussels Studies [Online]*. DOI: 10.4000/brussels.382. (accessed 06/03/2020).
- Traynor I (2015) *Molenbeek: the Brussels borough becoming known as Europe's jihadi central*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/15/molenbeek-the-brussels-borough-in-the-spotlight-after-paris-attacks> (accessed 07/03/2019).
- Tudor A (2018) Cross-fadings of racialisation and migratisation: the postcolonial turn in Western European gender and migration studies. *Gender, Place & Culture* 25(7): 1057-1072.
- Wimark T and Östh J (2014) The city as a single gay male magnet? Gay and lesbian geographical concentration in Sweden. *Population, Space and Place* 20(8): 739-752.
- Yuval-Davis N (2007) Intersectionality, citizenship and contemporary politics of belonging. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 10(4): 561-574.

